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ABSTRACT

This essay offers background and explanatory information concerning a new approach to higher education--the upper division university and the Illinois Community College System. Emphasis is placed on Governors State University and Sangamon State University, two senior universities who offer an innovative and flexible approach to baccalaureate and master's level study. The difference between this new system and the traditional institution of higher education are reviewed. (Author/MJM)

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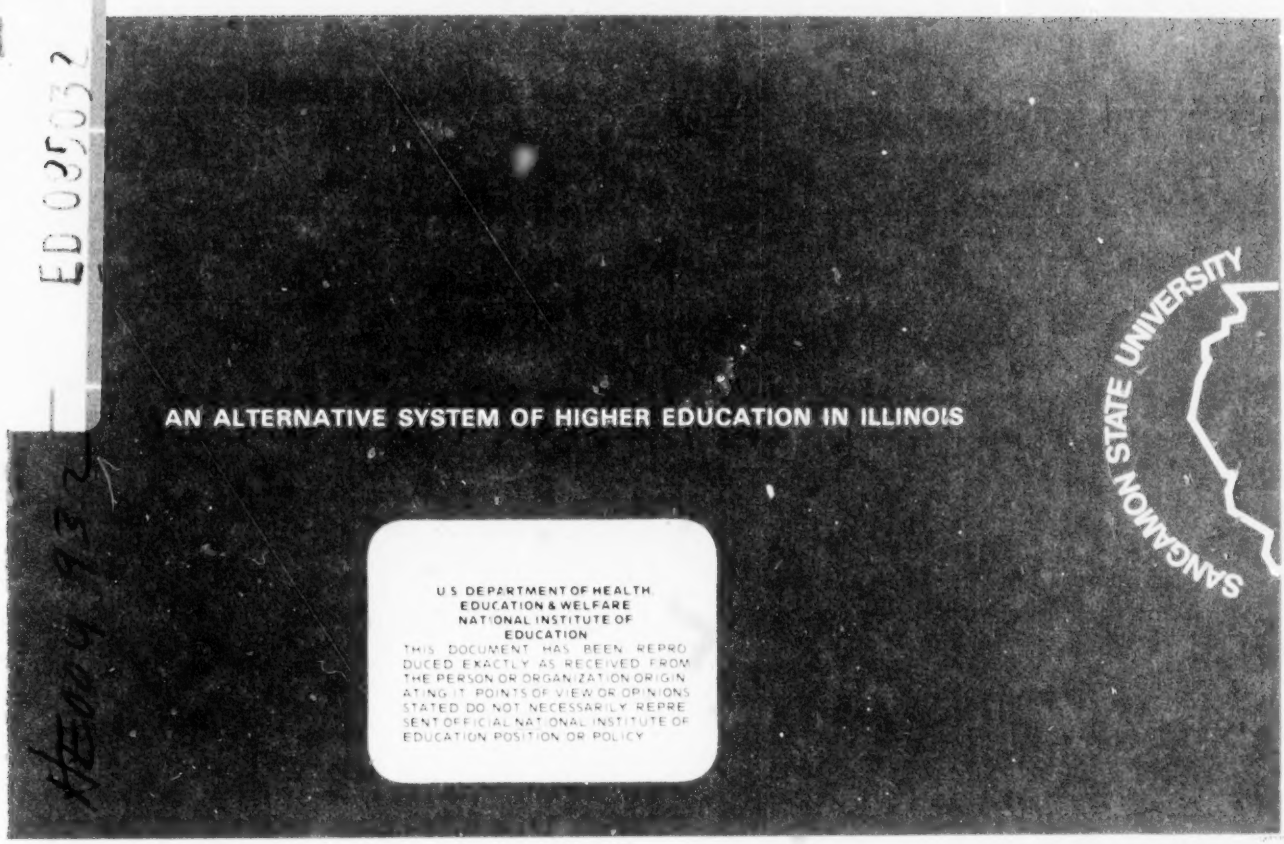
AN ALTERNATIVE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ILLINOIS
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TO THE CITIZENS OF ILLINOIS

The upper division university, and the Illinois Community College System, together form a new approach to higher education, an alternative way to fulfill the educational needs of society. Governors State University and Sangamon State University are Illinois' pioneering senior universities. They offer an innovative and flexible approach to baccalaureate and master's level study. But they offer more than that, and the difference between this new system and the traditional institution of higher education is not yet widely understood. This essay is offered in the hope of increasing such understanding.

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AN ALTERNATIVE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ILLINOIS

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This analysis was originally prepared for discussion at the opening general session of the April 13, 1973, meeting of the Illinois Junior College Faculty Association. It will also appear in vol. 1, no. 2 of **Community College Frontiers**, published at Sangamon State University by the two new upper division universities with support from the community colleges, as a service to the alternative system.

In advanced industrial nations, where social conditions change more rapidly than in past times and where news is disseminated widely and quickly, the historic sluggishness of mature social institutions in adapting old functions to current realities becomes increasingly perilous . . . The unfinished business of two hundred years remains on the agenda and conscience of the nation.

Doris B. Holleb
Colleges and the Urban Poor

At the time the Illinois junior college system was conceived and launched the prospect was for indefinite expansion and growth of higher education. There were more than enough students in sight to keep the State's traditional universities occupied, and money, too, was plentiful. Americans had great confidence in their higher education system, and they assumed that the universities would see to the perpetuation of their prospering society. They also assumed that by expanding their higher education system they were creating the means for dealing with many of their social problems.

Today things look different. America's ardor for higher education has cooled considerably, funds are growing tighter, and all of us — citizens, educators, students, public policy makers — are engaged in making a painful reassessment of virtually everything we had so long considered settled. While one might wish it were not necessary such reassessment is nonetheless an essential evolutionary step, for there is no other peaceful way to bring about ordered change and growth in a society of such massive scale.

Because a good educational system takes a long time to build and only a short time to dismantle, it becomes doubly important to offer constructive contributions to the great debate over higher education that is going on in Illinois now. Only when issues and alternatives are argued vigorously can they be understood and acted upon wisely. This

discussion of the highly significant alternative system that has emerged in our State is offered in this spirit. If the Illinois higher education system was once so satisfactory, why did it have to change?

This alternative system comprises the 47 publicly supported community colleges and teaching centers and the two new upper-division-graduate universities (Sangamon State and Governors State universities). The system is large (it serves well over 50 percent of all higher education enrollments in Illinois); it is vigorous, idealistic, and enthusiastic; its faculties have attracted many exciting educators of a new breed; it serves and identifies with a large population segment for whom post-secondary learning is a novel experience; it has its roots deep in the social, economic, and political life of local communities as well as in the State and its agencies and institutions; it draws more students from the established universities than it sends to them; the colleges and universities comprising it operate with open admissions policies; the two universities, denied the authority to enroll freshmen and sophomores and to control the curricula conveying students to their doors, are free-standing and independent, and they offer a new kind of linkage between the world of practical affairs and the world of the higher learning.

To perceive these institutions simply as duplicate parts within a uniform, traditional system is to fail completely to understand their character and their relationship to that system and to broad social developments. Their potential for bringing about the needed revitalization is great indeed, but if they are not given assistance as they struggle to realize this potential it will not take long (five years?) before they are squeezed into sterile conformity with the familiar, traditional patterns.

Once before in our history, when the American people faced a similar opportunity, they came up with a significant new invention because the existing higher educational system's rigidity made it irrelevant to the needs of a large segment of that society. In its origins and throughout almost all of its history, higher education has had little relevance for the larger segments of society; it has been oriented around aristocratic ideas and toward creating an elite chosen to provide social leadership; it was designed to reproduce and to perpetuate this leadership and its values. Its practitioners could devote themselves to these goals because their station in life — economic, political, social — was assured. The great majority of ordinary men had little aspiration to enter that world of learning, nor were they sought for it. It was reserved for those with the inclination and the time to reflect on the eternal questions regarding being, order,

good, evil, universality, and who had the urge to create great systems of thought.

This heritage came to the shores of America from Europe in the total matrix of Western ideas and values, and this is essentially what the higher learning was like in America through the middle of the 19th century, when a powerful new idea began to take shape.

By that time the North Americans had spread across their continent, and most of them were engaged in trying to wrest a living from the land under unfamiliar conditions and with limited knowledge resources. The inherited wisdom about soil and weather they had brought to this new strange land proved to be largely inappropriate. When these rural Americans looked to the existing community of scholars for help they found little, if any; indeed, there was little interest in their problems. (The charge of irrelevancy against higher education was not invented in the 1960's.) What they sought was knowledge of a sort that would help them master the environment — "practical" knowledge.

Faced with this discrepancy between need and reality, farmers supported federal legislation dedicating substantial amounts of land (their only common wealth) to the creation of a new kind of college in each state "where the leading object shall be . . . to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts — in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life" (Morrill Act, 1862).

Thanks in good part to the help of these colleges, in time America's predominantly

rural population was able to achieve the economic power and the stability that still seem to be necessary before its citizens can realize the American dream for themselves and their children. Not only did these land grant colleges enable our agricultural economy to prosper; they also provided a home where science could develop. Their fostering of the engineering and other technologies made possible America's industrial development; and, perhaps even more important, they assured a continuous, swelling flow of educated men and women into the life stream of America, people deeply committed to that dream. A splendid tradition was established.

By middle of the Twentieth Century the American people had created a stable, prosperous nation based upon a synthesis of these (new) practical and (ancient) theoretical values. By the end of World War II their higher education system had achieved a homogeneity and consistency which was able to tolerate the amiable coexistence of both the ancient "impractical" learnings and the newer pragmatic knowledge, indeed to combine them. It was this rich mixture which helped nourish and produce the explosive energies and growth of America in post World War II decades. The land grant colleges had indeed served Americans well these 100 years.

The achievements of the Americans became the envy and then the model for the underdeveloped world; one heard much in the post World War II era about "rising expectations". The same process was going on inside the United States

also where, once again, a vast new segment of the American people, for whom the existing kind of higher education was not really appropriate, began calling for new kinds of learning that would let them achieve the economic base on which to live in comfort and dignity. And in responding to this popular need the American people once more produced a major new educational invention, the community college. It is the "people's college" of the late Twentieth Century, whose task it is to serve vast segments of an overwhelmingly industrial society in ways comparable to the service which the first "people's college", the land grant college, gave to an overwhelmingly rural society. Its doors are open to all who would enter.

At the time the Illinois Junior College Act was adopted, in 1965, America was rolling along, as noted, with its faith in higher education untested, and the Act was seen mainly as a magnanimous action bringing higher education to the community level. America was prosperous, growth was in the air, education was an unsurpassed investment, and there was nothing to suggest that this major democratization of access to education would set developments in motion that would bring about fundamental changes in the very concept of higher education.

This deeper significance of the alternative system is only now beginning to become apparent, nearly ten years after the Junior College Act was passed

and after fairly extensive experience with it. It is doubtful whether those who made the crucial decisions in bringing it into being foresaw what they were really setting in motion; they were doubtless too close to the events to see their meaning in perspective. It is doubtful that anyone could have foreseen the consequences of open admissions, for example — that this policy really meant that the higher education establishment was giving up the traditional power to shape its own destiny when it surrendered the "luxury of selecting students who fit its ways of life."* There was mumbling about "lowering standards" as there always has been whenever changes are proposed in higher education. But the traditional system had always been able to continue essentially intact, and so it was assumed that these changes, too, could be assimilated. It was also assumed that the new colleges would do the universities' work for them by teaching to freshman and sophomores what the universities wanted taught and when; and that they would weed out those incapable of doing "college level" work or unwilling to make the necessary effort, and encourage them to look elsewhere and not to the universities for training in "practical" skills and trades. This view was held by the great majority of those in a position to influence the decisions that were being taken: existing higher education institutions (public *and* private), their alumni, business and industry, the professions, public officials.

*K. Patricia Cross, "The New Learners," **Change**, February 1973, p. 32.

As so often happens when doors are only partly opened, things did not quite work out as intended. The new colleges in Illinois attracted large numbers of strongly motivated people of all age ranges, of greater as well as lesser abilities, with enormously varied talents, with over- and under-inflated views of their capacities and powers and worth. And this rich variety of people began to distribute itself over the wide range of transfer and non-transfer courses and curricula in the colleges. And they, as well as the new colleges, began to discover that the differences among people and between education and the "real world" were often far greater and more significant than the institutionalized differences between transfer and non-transfer programs were assumed to be. And, with stubborn insistence, the non-transfer groups refused to regard themselves as less able to learn, less entitled to a chance, less deserving of respect than the ones on whom society and its certifying agents, the universities, were ready to bestow their blessing in the form of the degree.

As a result, community college students and their families, educators and administrators and trustees, and

legislators representing them became increasingly irritated with the practices of the universities in dealing with students wanting to pursue learning beyond these colleges, at the universities. Other pressures to establish additional, new universities also began to surface; and competition to get control of them was keen. Finally, these two lines of force — demand for new universities, and frustration with the self-serving policies of the existing universities — converged, and so two new free-standing universities of an entirely different type were called for, one to be located in the north and one in the State capital. These were denied the authority to enroll freshmen and sophomores; they were mandated to work in close coordination with the community colleges; they were kept out from under the control of established, competing university systems; and their task was to teach people.

The necessary elements for an alternative system were in being.

That is what the alternative system is about. This is what it is called upon to do — to take a large, new, heterogeneous segment of our population where they are, to help them prepare to claim their rightful share of the American heritage and, in doing so, to bestow their gifts on America in exchange.

Enough is known about the limitations of traditional baccalaureate education and about the characteristics of the new populations reaching for higher education as a means of improving their lot, to make apparent the justification for this alternative system on educational grounds: the majority of emerging students come from backgrounds with slight appreciation for bookish learning and instruction; the majority bring along a pride in their own cultures for which traditional academic values too often have shown little tolerance and understanding; the majority wants to learn what will let them advance economically since even free men can enjoy the good life only if their existence has a reasonably solid economic base.

However, the alternative system that "agrees to do what it can for all comers (thereby) . . . takes on the obligation of adapting itself to the needs of students . . . Thousands upon thousands who would never before have considered college are on our doorsteps . . . We face the task of gearing up to serve a new clientele."*

Ms. Cross has other things to say about the new populations which bear directly upon the very large and the very different tasks to which, obviously, only an alternative system can address itself.

"The full meaning of universival postsecondary education has probably not been understood, and certainly not accepted, by the majority of people

* Ibid. p. 32.

whose life work is education. The most common position among faculty who consider themselves enlightened is that higher education should be open to all those able and willing to do the work in the manner and form in which it is now offered. A second position is taken by a growing minority of misguided liberals who are willing to ' lower the standards ' of academic education in order to get credentials in the hands of the disadvantaged so that they can obtain the material and social benefits of society.

"Neither position is adequate for these times. The purpose of education is not to certify (especially not falsely) nor is it to prepare a band of elite intellectual leaders (except perhaps in graduate education). It is to maximize the potential of each person to live a fulfilled and constructive life. And to accomplish that end, we need not lower standards."*

Parenthetically, it must be stated at this point that the objective of this discussion and the strategy of the argument is *NOT* to attack the great universities' dedication to the creation of new knowledge and graduate study; *not* to denigrate the enduring values of scholarship; *not* to minimize the great contributions by rare individuals; *not* to scoff at society's need

* Ibid., p. 34.

to seek out its best and most gifted minds and to favor them with every opportunity to develop. The need for truly great universities has probably never been greater, yet in an era when often the new demand is for equality of instant result rather than opportunity, it would be terribly easy to start dismantling them, fragile as they are. What is being criticized is the naivete underlying the post-World War II assumption that there was only one valid model of higher education, namely, the complex university with its strong emphasis upon graduate study, and that every college or university should emulate its form and its aims. The purpose of this discussion is to state the case for an important alternative model which is only now beginning to emerge into the bright light of open discussion.

How, then, do those of us in the alternative system go about discharging the obligation to adapt it to the needs of these students?

First and foremost, by keeping all debate as open and as broadly public and as issue-oriented as it is possible to maintain it. This debate has great public policy overtones and cannot be left to the expert professionals alone; there must be the widest possible participation in its examination and discussion.

Then, assuming that our greatest reason for being and our most precious asset is the chance to make fresh starts, HOW DO WE:

1) remind ourselves constantly to look to the future instead of seeking guidance only from the past?

2) bring ourselves to place our knowledge and experience in the service of people — to give it away to the very people who need it most — instead of husbanding it and using it for personal and private advantage?

3) resist the temptation to reach for familiar responses to new opportunities, changing just enough of the jargon to convince ourselves that we are innovating?

4) come together in small groups, not to take comfort in common interest but to stimulate unfamiliar thought and new ideas, and to learn from each other?

5) design and establish a comprehensive, integrated information system that will serve policy and legislative and fiscal needs and that will *also* let the forty-seven plus two institutions in the alternative system generate the quantity and the quality of data they need for educational planning, evaluation, and developing new teaching ideas?

6) further honest interdisciplinary, humane learning in conjunction with the skills and the self-knowledge needed to

function as productive and valued members of society?

7) use our institutions, our knowledge, our talents to help people discover the connections between on-campus and off-campus learning and living, between affective and cognitive learning, and to build whole lives around these connections? In their brief history the two new universities have set off several potent charges that are already reverberating throughout the total range of Illinois colleges and universities.

8) help people prepare to live fulfilling lives in a society no longer primarily based on population increase, economic growth, and unlimited consumption of natural resources?

In sum: how will we pick up the rare challenge given us at this juncture in human affairs by the alternative system? Can we do justice to the powerful idea of a people's college geared to today's realities? When the vast reserves of spirit and energy present in those now claiming their turn are released, all men will once again be the beneficiaries. And there will surely be lots of openings at the top for them to move into and from which they may make their contributions to the health of America.

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